**Landscape and Nature **

The North Wessex Downs is a dramatic landscape with rolling chalk downlands, forests, woods and dales. Open expansive views are punctuated by clumps of beech woodland crowning the downland summits, forming prominent landmarks. Sparsely populated, the downs possess a strong sense of remoteness and timelessness.

The ancient Ridgeway runs along the northern scarp of the downs and is peppered with barrow sites and hill forts, the world famous chalk-cut figure of the Uffington White Horse and even passing through the Avebury World Heritage Site.

Grazed for centuries by sheep and rabbits, the grassland of the downs supports a wide array of wildlife including rare butterflies such the Marsh Fritillary, Chalkhill Blue and Silver Spotted Skipper. Chalk grassland is one of the most biologically rich and diverse habitats in the UK with over 40 species of flowering plants recorded in a single square metre. This includes rare orchids and wonderfully named plants like the Devil’s-bit Scabious, Lady’s Bedstraw or Kidney Vetch. In the vast open skies above the downs, skylarks, lapwings and majestic birds of prey can be seen.

The extensive woodlands of Savernake and West Woods provide peacefulness and seclusion in contrast to the remoteness of the nearby open chalk downs. Savernake is ancient woodland of oak and beech established in the 11th century as a royal hunting forest and now designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest. The chalk downs form an imposing backdrop to the flat, low-lying vales. The Vale of Pewsey separates the two main chalk upland blocks. Belts of willow, alder and scrub line the watercourses that thread across the vales, the streams, waterside pastures and woodlands forming a lush wetland landscape of considerable ecological value.

**Places to visit before you leave**

**Savernake Forest**

Extensive (2750 acre) ancient oak and beechforest. Visit the Grand Avenue of beechesplanted by Capability Brown, the Big BellyOak and other veteran trees and try to see(or hear) crossbills, hawfinches and even anightjar.

**Wittenham Clumps**

Two distinctive round hills topped with 18th century beech trees give a panoramic view of the surrounding countryside and the nearby historic town of Dorchester on Thames. There is a hillfort on Castle Hill, with earthworks dating to the Bronze and Iron Ages. The hills can be seen from miles around and are popular with local people for kite flying and weekend walks. Just a short walk away are Days Lock on the river Thames and Dorchester Abbey.

**Watership Down**

The Down became famous, first from Richard Adams’s book Watership Down about a group of rabbits, then the animated film accompanied by Art Garfunkel’s song ‘Bright Eyes’. Rabbits can still be found on the Down along with rare butterflies such as the Adonis Blue and Silver-spotted Skipper. The Down is a well-known beauty spot and is well used by walkers. Stunning views from Woodcott Down and Ladle Hill contrast with the picturesque Hampshire villages of St. Mary Bourne and Binley.

**The Living Rainforest**

No need to travel the world to experience the delights of a rainforest as surprisingly there is one on our doorstep. Located at Hampstead Norreys, The Living Forest’s tropical glasshouses are packed with over 700 species of plants and animals normally found in exotic locations. A great day out for children, who can watch birds, butterflies and lizards roam free in their natural habitat.

**White Horse Hill**

Situated on the northern escarpment of the downs, the hill is world-famous for its stylised Bronze-Age chalk White Horse. Just below the White Horse the last Ice Age has left a dry valley with rippled sides known as Giant’s Steps – a must for landscape photographers. On top of the hill is an Iron Age fort with a rampart and ditch. The fort is the highest point in Oxfordshire and on a clear day gives a view of six counties.

**Pewsey Downs National Nature Reserve**

A wonderful sweep of chalk downland located to the north of the Pewsey Vale. The reserve covers three hills and includes Alton Barnes chalk white horse cut into the hillside. The reserve offers great opportunities for wildlife photography with a landscape views stretching across the Vale of Pewsey to Salisbury Plain. While you are there, also look out for the Sarsen stones, known locally as ‘Grey Weathers’. Other magnificent examples of chalk downland can be found at Cherhill Down, Barbury Castle, Seven Barrows at Lambourn, Walbury Hill and Beacon Hill.

Visit our interactive map and select ‘Chalk Downs’

**West Woods**

Located to the south west of Marlborough, West Woods are famous for their spectacular display of bluebells in May and early June. The woods are almost entirely made up of beech trees and are very popular with walkers and wildlife photographers. Bluebell woods can also be found at Collingbourne and Coldridge Woods, Hailey Wood in the grounds of Ashdown House and in Brightwalton. A little earlier in the year in February, you can see the glorious snowdrop display at Welford Park.

**Rare Habitats and Wildlife Sites**

The North Wessex Downs are home to some very special wildlife sites, many designated as ‘Sites of Special Scientific Interest’. A must for the wildlife enthusiast who likes to get off the beaten track. Rack Marsh is a fine old wet meadow characteristic of the Lambourn Valley in days gone by, with considerable botanical interest. Full of rushes and sedges, it is possible to find such plants as early marsh orchids and Water Avens. Abandoned lime workings at Old Burghclere are now a refuge for rare flowers and butterflies. Kintbury newt ponds and the watermeadows of Freeman’s Marsh and Stonebridge Lane can be found along the Kennet Valley. ‘Commons’ dating from the Medieval period are a great place to walk, including those at Inkpen, Ashampstead, Snelsmore and Bucklebury.

**Letcombe Valley**

Letcombe Valley has one of only two chalk streams in Oxfordshire. The clear waters of this rare habitat are home to some unusual and interesting wildlife including Bullhead fish, Brook Lamprey (a primitive jawless fish) and Water Vole. The chalk streams of the Kennet, Lambourn, Pang and Og also flow through the North Wessex Downs. Meanwhile, watercress is still grown by the River Bourne in North Hampshire.